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# The Northland School Division Inquiry Team Report

*to the Honourable Dave Hancock,  
Minister of Education,  
Government of Alberta*

November 2010



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS



The Northland School Division Inquiry was convened by the Minister of Education in January 2010 to gather information, report findings and offer recommendations regarding Northland School Division (NSD). The focus was on the Division's:

- Student learning and achievement outcomes
- Instructional and administrative leadership
- Financial condition and budget processes
- Board and administration oversight of capital projects and day-to-day operations
- Operation of central administration
- Compliance with fiduciary responsibility
- Current governance structure and its effectiveness
- Present boundaries and alternatives to these boundaries.

Between February and July 2010, the Inquiry Team reviewed extensive documentary information, visited all 23 communities served by the jurisdiction and met three dozen persons with expert knowledge about NSD operations, as well as with leadership representatives of the school systems neighbouring.

The nature of the Inquiry's terms of reference has generated a substantial number of recommendations. In the following listing, those presented in **bold type** are regarded by the Inquiry Team as key measures required to re-establish NSD's effectiveness.

The recommendations range from broad in scope to the narrowly focused and specific. There is a timeframe staging element to the recommendations: while many can be initiated immediately, others will require process over time, but in all cases, work needs to begin promptly.

While the recommendations are structured following the terms of reference, a more grouped and phased approach may be helpful for implementation. Implementation planning requires immediate action and needs to engage NSD communities and stakeholders in considering how best to proceed with the recommendations.

### Primary Considerations

With effective governance and leadership, a renewed NSD has the potential to contribute significantly to the improvement of Aboriginal student learning outcomes in northern Alberta, but this will only happen if NSD becomes a strong force for change.

**Recommendation #1:** That the provincial government maintain the current boundary structure of NSD, except for the circumstances set out later in Recommendations #44 and #45; and that NSD be clearly

identified and recognized as a special purpose school authority for Aboriginal education that is focused around capitalizing on its unique opportunity to provide excellence in First Nations and Métis education.

**Recommendation #2:** That Alberta Education implement a mandated progress review process to occur at three-year-intervals; further, that if after nine years, there is no or only limited progress in implementing the recommendations of this report and in improving measures in the Annual Educational Result Reports, then the need for further interventions, including possible radical boundary change, should be reconsidered.

**Recommendation #3:** That NSD implement an improvement strategy requiring an action-oriented leadership structure that is centred on strategic governance and focused on the following three central priorities over the next nine to 12 years:

- English language and numeracy development
- Improved student attendance
- Strengthening parents' engagement with their schools through improving communication and levels of trust. In this regard, it is recommended that NSD take the lead in implementing the FNMI Services Branch parent-engagement initiative.

**Recommendation #4:** That as part of the process to improve parent and community engagement with the school, NSD:

- Encourage and facilitate appropriate teacher involvement with their community, and where possible, develop extracurricular activities with students
- Establish the practice of schools and their staffs regularly hosting community supper gatherings at the school as a means of developing awareness and engagement.

## Student Learning Outcomes and Achievement Results

Improving student achievement results requires a sustained focus on language development, improved student attendance and increased parent engagement.

**Recommendation #5:** That NSD more effectively utilize locally developed measures within the Accountability Pillar to better tailor the accountability process to the unique characteristics of the jurisdiction (for example regarding grade level of achievement).



**Recommendation #6:** That NSD engage teachers and parents in a process of ongoing review of Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs) as they are released in an effort to:

- Build greater awareness and understanding of the tests
- Provide feedback to Alberta Education where there is agreement that particular test items may in fact be biased either culturally or because the items assume background experiences that students living in remote communities may not have.

**Recommendation #7:** That NSD review and update its grade promotion policy and take steps to ensure that the revised policy is well communicated to parents. NSD should make every effort to ensure that parents understand the distinction between grade placement and academic grade level of achievement.

**Recommendation #8:** That NSD place sustained emphasis on strengthening languages (English and Aboriginal) by multiple strategies that are tailored to the contextual needs of each community. In this regard specifically that NSD leadership research a successful approach for the acquisition of Aboriginal languages, English language and numeracy. Further, that NSD leadership establish baseline data on these areas and train all staff in effective teaching of selected programs or approaches. That NSD also maintain longitudinal data to track student progress, adjust strategies as needed and carry out ongoing assessment.

**Recommendation #9:** That library enhancement for the purpose of supporting reading be an integral part of the effort to strengthen languages.

**Recommendation #10:** That it be mandatory for NSD schools to offer full-day Kindergarten programs.

**Recommendation #11:** That NSD promote and maintain close coordination with Head Start programs as a means of helping alleviate the readiness for school deficiencies experienced by many students, and further, that in communities where no other agency offers a Head Start program, NSD should consider offering such a program.

**Recommendation #12:** That NSD strengthen the Aboriginal cultural content within the curriculum; and further that more emphasis, including staff development and support, be placed on Aboriginal content infusion as provided for in the Alberta curriculum.

**Recommendation #13:** That NSD strengthen professional leadership for Aboriginal language instructors and provide training for Aboriginal language instructors to increase the capacity to deliver quality Aboriginal language programs.

**Recommendation #14:** That there be recognition of the reality that not all parents support Aboriginal language and cultural instruction within the school environment by providing an opt-out arrangement similar to the manner in which public schools generally deal with religious instruction.

**Recommendation #15:** That NSD establish a system-level to system-level administrative liaison process with neighbouring school jurisdictions providing instruction to students from NSD communities to address student and program articulation issues and other considerations.

**Recommendation #16:** That NSD endeavour to improve communications with schools and jurisdictions offering junior-senior high school services to NSD students. Further, that NSD assign staff to monitor the performance of, and act as an advocate for, all students pursuing junior-senior high school programs in schools outside of NSD.

**Recommendation #17:** That NSD give planning consideration to establishing a combined regional and virtual high school to serve students in the smaller communities, as an alternative to existing boarding arrangements.

**Recommendation #18:** That NSD initiate and sustain discussions with Northern Lakes College and any other post-secondary institution that has a presence in communities served by NSD to capitalize on potential joint efforts in high school programming.

## Central Administration and Leadership

A re-establishment of central administration and leadership capacity is needed for NSD to be more effective.

**Recommendation #19:** That as NSD is re-defined as a special purpose system for Aboriginal education, there be a requirement, over time, for persons in leadership roles to have FNMI heritage and Aboriginal language fluency along with demonstrated skill in dealing effectively with Aboriginal cultures.

**Recommendation #20:** That NSD re-establish an effective orientation program for new hires, with a substantial emphasis on community and cultural components, and further, that the placement of new employees into communities be arranged with sufficient time for them to experience community-level orientation and settling-in prior to the start of teaching duties.



**Recommendation #21:** That NSD implement and maintain staff development activities that enhance teachers' skills at individualizing, differentiating instruction, employing more experiential-based learning activities and devising learning activities that include formative assessment skills, in recognition of the diverse learning levels and needs of NSD students.

**Recommendation #22:** That NSD ensure strengthened responsibility and accountability relationships between students, teachers, principals and the superintendency. In particular, that the human resources management function (recruitment and termination of personnel) become clearly a management activity with appropriate community input only; it must cease to be regarded as a governance function subject to political processes.

**Recommendation #23:** That NSD re-establish central, regionally based, administrative and pedagogical roles by re-directing some resources away from classroom-based positions. These re-established roles should provide direction, assistance and support to principals and teachers for NSD-wide approaches, implementation and assessment of core literacy and numeracy programs.

**Recommendation #24:** That NSD establish and sustain over time a school-community development function within the organization. This function should include a staff position whose job is to regularly and systematically facilitate school-based meetings with parents and community members to develop the school's strategic role within the future of the community. This staff position must take the lead in implementing the parent engagement process, including reflecting the concepts behind the former Community Schools program and the Integrated Services delivery model. Further, that this function also include designated resources to enable school staff to regularly host community gatherings (such as community suppers) at the school.

**Recommendation #25:** That NSD establish and sustain over time an internal communications function. This function should include a staff position whose job is to ensure that key messages about the system's priorities are directed to internal audiences through all appropriate channels. These key messages include the importance of: schooling, regular attendance, consistent parental support and the inclusion of Aboriginal culture.

**Recommendation #26:** That NSD continue to maintain and enhance records of the levels of training of paraprofessional/support staff.

**Recommendation #27:** That where paraprofessional/support staff members have not completed a level of training commensurate with their assignments, each staff member develop a training plan that leads to a recognized credential relating to their assignments and that NSD encourage and assist staff with in-service programs tied to course requirements.

**Recommendation #28:** That when new paraprofessional/support staff are hired, they be required to commit to an upgrading program/plan that leads to a recognized credential related directly to their assignment.

## Financial and Capital Management

Business management practices and arrangements require structural improvement.

**Recommendation #29:** That NSD ensure appropriate personnel and internal arrangements are in place for systematic quarterly financial reporting to the Board of Trustees.

**Recommendation #30:** That Alberta Education and NSD jointly explore supporting NSD teacher housing through an arms-length entity (some type of housing authority) acting on NSD's behalf, and perhaps on behalf of other public sector employers in northern Alberta communities, in order to get away from the staff relations issues associated with the employer being the landlord; further that innovative, ongoing provincial funding be implemented to enable such an arrangement to be viable.

**Recommendation #31:** That Alberta Education provide one-time catch-up funding to NSD for upgrading to current standards school libraries and facilities, particularly with respect to old portable classrooms, and the teacher housing inventory.

**Recommendation #32:** That NSD obtain title to, or an enforceable long-term interest in, land prior to commencing construction of any capital project.

**Recommendation #33:** That NSD ensure it has appropriate leases in place for all its schools situated on Métis Settlement lands.

**Recommendation #34:** That prior to releasing funds for the construction of new school facilities, Alberta Education verify that the recipient school jurisdiction has obtained title to, or an enforceable long-term interest in, the land for the building site.

**Recommendation #35:** That Alberta Education facilitate negotiation of a new, omnibus Education Agreement between NSD and Treaty 8 First Nations within the context of the *Memorandum of Understanding on First Nations Education in Alberta*, to replace the dated tuition agreements currently in place.



**Recommendation #36:** That Alberta Education take a leadership role in the establishment of a regional service and support consortium for First Nations and Métis education, involving NSD with neighbouring school jurisdictions and the First Nations education authorities operating in northern Alberta; further that funds from the FNMI grant be considered to enable initiatives in this area.

## Governance

Re-establishing effective governance and leadership requires a new structure.

**Recommendation #37:** That Alberta Education entrench NSD's governance policies and protocols in a Ministerial Order, or similar arrangement, to ensure that those in governance roles focus on governance activities and delegate management activities to staff, subject to effective accountability, reporting and oversight processes in a manner that cannot be unilaterally revised by NSD.

**Recommendation #38:** That the provincial government amend the *Northland School Division Act* to establish a nine-member Board of Trustees; seven elected by direct election (ward system), one other a First Nations' representative nominated pursuant to an Education Agreement (with Treaty 8) and one other a Métis representative nominated by Métis Settlements General Council, both of the latter appointed to the board by the Minister of Education. For a graphic representation, please see Appendix 12: Renewed Governance Model.

**Recommendation #39:** That a term limit of not more than two consecutive three-year terms be established for members of the Board of Trustees to ensure effective representation from throughout the system over time and to minimize the potential of factional politics and inappropriate concentrations of power.

**Recommendation #40:** That an ex officio (non-voting) member of the Board of Trustees be appointed by the Minister of Education as a process observer and coach to facilitate organizational change and ensure that the participants of the new structure remain true to intent. Please see Appendix 12: Renewed Governance Model.

**Recommendation #41:** That Alberta Education support a governance structure that fosters a sense of ownership at the community and parent levels without impinging unduly on school operations and teachers' professional practice.

**Recommendation #42:** That the provincial government amend the *Northland School Division Act* to expand Local School Board Committee membership to include parent and teacher representation and that its role be consistent with that of a School Council as set out in the School Council Regulation.

**Recommendation #43:** That a Council of Chairs of the newly constituted Local Boards meet twice yearly with the Board of Trustees in a legislative advisory role.

## Boundaries

There are a few instances where realignment of NSD schools with neighbouring school jurisdictions is consistent with the concept of NSD being an entity focused on Aboriginal students.

**Recommendation #44:** That Alberta Education appoint a facilitator to work with the Anzac School community and Fort McMurray Public School District regarding realignment of Anzac School to Fort McMurray Public School District jurisdiction.

**Recommendation #45:** That Alberta Education initiate a process for transferring Red Earth Creek School to Peace River School Division jurisdiction.

**Recommendation #46:** That NSD initiate school closure proceedings at Keg River.

**Recommendation #47:** That Alberta Education establish a process for Métis Settlements to periodically determine by plebiscite if they wish to remain part of NSD or transfer to a neighbouring school jurisdiction or vice-versa.

## Implementation

**Recommendation #48:** That Alberta Education create a multi-stakeholder implementation team including representation from:

- All its branches involved with NSD operations
- NSD leadership
- The external agencies and organizations involved with NSD

to engage in developing and delivering strategies, including those for community engagement with this report's recommendations, which are necessary to bring about positive change in NSD.



## MANDATE AND TERMS OF REFERENCE

In January 2010 the Minister of Education dismissed the Corporate Board of Northland School Division (NSD) and appointed an Official Trustee to oversee the jurisdiction. This action taken pursuant to provisions of the *School Act* reflected concern over persistently weak student learning outcomes and other matters relating to the governance of the jurisdiction. The Inquiry was initiated in conjunction with this initiative to gather information and develop recommendations for improving this situation.

### Terms of Reference

The Northland School Division Inquiry was established on January 21, 2010 by the Minister of Education with the following terms of reference:

It is expected that under Section 41(1) of the *School Act*, and with all authority granted by Sections 41(2), (3) and (4) of the *School Act*, the members of the Inquiry will, as appropriate, consult with the 23 communities that comprise NSD, and will gather information for, report findings to and offer recommendations to the Minister, on the following:

1. Student achievement in NSD and plans developed by the Division and schools to improve student learning and achievement results as measured by the Accountability Pillar.
2. The exercise of instructional and administrative leadership by the Superintendent of Schools, including steps taken to improve student learning and achievement, and regarding the management of personnel, special education, FNMI programming and supervision of schools.
3. The financial condition of NSD, including, without limitation, budget processes and allocation of funds to schools.
4. The nature and extent of board or administration oversight in capital projects and day-to-day financial operations. It is expected that specific attention will be paid to the Bishop Routhier School in Peavine and to the issues that have precluded occupancy of this facility by NSD.
5. The operation of the NSD central administration.
6. Compliance with fiduciary responsibilities by members of the board and administration.
7. The effectiveness of the current governance structure of NSD, specifically the devolution of authority to Local School Board Committees (LSBC) pursuant to the *Northland School Division Act* and Northland Policy 7 — Local School Board Committees. In this context, members of the Inquiry are expected to seek input from the 23 communities that comprise NSD about the effectiveness of existing governance structures and alternatives to the present governance structure.

8. Alternatives to the present boundaries of the school Division, including consideration of the possible incorporation of a number of NSD schools into other existing school jurisdictions. In this context, members of the Inquiry are expected to seek input from the 23 communities that comprise NSD about the effectiveness of existing school jurisdiction boundaries.
9. Any other matter connected with the management, administration or operation of the board, as further directed by the Minister.



## INQUIRY TEAM MEMBERS



**David van Tamelen (Chair)** worked for the Peace River School Division in Peace River from 1971 to 2004 as an educator and administrator including in the roles of Secretary Treasurer and then Superintendent of Schools. He attended the University of Alberta where he received his Bachelor of Education (1970), Bachelor of Arts (1971) and his Master of Education specializing in Educational Administration (1988). He completed his Doctorate in Education in 1999. Since his retirement he has operated an educational consulting practice, whose clients have included the Alberta School Boards Association, several school jurisdictions and Alberta Education.

**Nathan Matthew** has represented First Nations education on diverse committees and councils at the local, provincial and national levels. As chief of the Simpcw First Nation for 17 years and chair of the Shuswap Nation Tribal Council for two terms, Nathan has paved the way for positive changes in Aboriginal communities. His deep commitment to quality education for Aboriginal learners has been the focus of his distinguished career as a political and educational leader. Under his leadership the First Nations of the Province of British Columbia signed the first Aboriginal Education Jurisdiction Agreement with the federal and provincial governments. He received a Bachelor of Recreation and Education from the University of British Columbia in 1972 and received his Master of Education in 1990. In 2006, he was awarded an honorary Doctorate from Thompson Rivers University. He served as the British Columbia First Nations representative on the Education Advisory Council to B.C.'s Minister of Education from 1989 to 2005.

**Keith Wagner's** teaching and leadership experience has taken him across the province from southern Alberta to Grande Prairie and Fort Vermillion in the far north at all levels of school and school system administration. He has also served with the Curriculum Branch of Alberta Education, including in the roles of Director of that branch and as an Acting Assistant Deputy Minister. His diverse perspectives as a former teacher, school principal and Deputy Superintendent have led him to his current occupation as a private consultant in educational policy and curriculum issues. In this regard he has worked on several projects with various school boards and the Alberta School Boards Association. He received his Bachelor of Education from the University of Calgary in 1971 and obtained his Master of Arts in Education from the University of Victoria in 1983.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Appreciation is extended to all who helped out with the Inquiry Team's work.

Executive Secretary Lorraine Cardinal-Roy is from Sucker Creek First Nation. She is fluent in Cree. In addition to her administrative role, Ms. Cardinal-Roy provided valuable cultural knowledge, advice and support.

The First Nations, Métis and Inuit Services Branch (Alberta Education) provided administrative support and community facilitation to the Inquiry Team. Education managers, including Debbie Mineault, fluent in Cree who have extensive experience with education in Aboriginal communities, provided assistance with community engagement and protocol.

Billy Joe Laboucan from Little Buffalo provided community facilitation. His fluency in the Cree language and knowledge of Northlands communities was invaluable.

Inquiry Co-ordinator Sandra Shepitka-Boyle, for her organizational expertise and liaison with Alberta Education. Also to the Alberta Education staff who provided information and technical assistance as arranged by the co-ordinator.

Official Trustee Colin Kelly provided facilitation and information support.

The Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) provided assistance in developing the survey questionnaire.

Thanks are extended to the many knowledgeable individuals who spent time sharing insights; and to NSD central office staff who provided documents and shared their experience and insights.

Special thanks are extended to Ann Rosin, Executive Secretary at NSD, and school principals and secretaries for their logistical assistance.

Thank you to Colin Fetter, counsel, Brownlee LLP Barristers & Solicitors and Nancy Mackenzie, editor, for their assistance with the preparation of this report.

And finally, the Inquiry Team is very grateful to all of the people in the school communities who came and shared their thoughts. All shared a genuine desire to see improvements in their children's education.





## INTRODUCTION

This report provides a summary of the NSD Inquiry Team's work, including information-gathering activities, findings and recommendations for consideration and in-depth appendices.

Northland School Division's demographic is unique in Alberta. More than 95 per cent of the student population is First Nations, Métis or Inuit (FNMI). Geographically, the population is dispersed in predominantly remote, small communities. NSD's student learning outcomes as measured by the provincial Accountability Pillar are weak and — other than at the Grade 3 acceptable level — have shown no significant improvement in most measurement areas over the past five years. For this to improve, the Aboriginal vision, support and active involvement for student development must become integral to NSD's future. The purpose of NSD must be common to the purpose and expectations of its FNMI populations in the schools and in the communities.

The Inquiry Team confirmed that NSD communities have a clear desire to keep their school division as an entity. Both geographic and cultural isolation are feared. If schools are transferred into mainstream jurisdictions, the people are concerned about marginalization. A key message heard was "Make NSD work, don't hide the problems of Aboriginal education in other jurisdictions." Even if substantial boundary changes were seen to be rational, they would not be amenable to the populations served given the socio-cultural realities of the communities and would likely set back some of the gains which have been made regarding parent and community engagement with the schools. There is an evident sense of ownership that both staff and community members feel toward NSD. Yet, in spite of many concerns, a spirit of enthusiasm and regard for the organization endures.

While it may seem counter-intuitive to maintain NSD operation of schools where the students move to neighbouring jurisdictions to complete high school, the Aboriginal focus of NSD should establish a strong foundation for its students at the elementary and junior high school level so that — secure in their identity and educational skill level — they can more successfully transition to the mainstream school experience. In this respect, NSD needs to be more strategic in its governance and program delivery approach for Aboriginal students.

Much of what is reported here is not new; many findings and recommendations are a reiteration of previous studies and reports. NSD has proven to be a rather change-resistant organization. To improve student learning outcomes, the organization must now overcome that limitation and make substantial adjustments to improve student results. Advocacy for change is an essential ingredient for the future success of NSD.

For the most part, this report and its recommendations are directed at NSD and Alberta Education. However, it must be recognized that other organizations and

entities that impact the communities, for example Children and Youth Services, also have to be engaged with securing the improvement of student outcomes. Also, the *Memorandum of Understanding for First Nations Education in Alberta*, established in February 2010 between Alberta, Canada and Treaties 6, 7 and 8, establishes part of this inter-agency context.

The nature of the Inquiry's terms of reference has generated a substantial number of recommendations, which range from broad in scope to those that are narrowly focused and specific. Additionally, there is a timeframe element to some of the recommendations: while many can be initiated immediately, some need to be dealt with ahead of others and some will require process over time. While the recommendations in the report are structured following the terms of reference, a more grouped and phased approach may be helpful for implementation. To be effective, it is very important that this implementation planning begin immediately to engage NSD communities and stakeholders in considering how best to proceed with the recommendations.





## CONSULTATION AND INQUIRY PROCESS

NSD serves approximately 2,900 Kindergarten to Grade 12 students in 23 schools located in remote communities in northern Alberta. Of these, approximately 57 per cent are provincial students and 43 per cent are federally supported First Nations students. An overview of NSD is provided in Appendix 1: Map of Northland School Division and Appendix 2: NSD Communities, Schools, Grades and Enrolment. Please also see Appendix 3: Accountability Pillar Overall Summary, which provides 2009 data on Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs), Diploma Exam values and other overall evaluations based on a variety of measures.

In consideration of the cultural environment, the Inquiry took a non-legalistic, informal yet structured approach to receiving input. The objective was to be approachable, responsive and accepting of whatever information people wished to direct to the Inquiry Team. The community-based information-gathering was conducted in as flexible a manner as possible. A mixture of team members meeting together and of individual members meeting with sources was used to manage scheduling and workload. Particular effort was made to ensure team member participation for the community visits; in all cases, at least two members were able to attend and in most cases all three were present. Where team members conducted individual meetings, information was shared with the other members on an ongoing basis and debriefing conversations were held on a regular basis throughout the information-gathering phase of the Inquiry. This resulted in a somewhat iterative process, where additional sources were engaged to follow-up on topics and questions that emerged as the information-gathering proceeded.

The team was careful not to intervene in operational matters of the system. Issues of this nature that came to the attention of the Inquiry were referred to NSD governance and administration through regular liaison communications between the Inquiry Chairman and the Official Trustee.

It should be noted that while the Inquiry gathered and analysed a large quantity of data, this process was not conducted within the standards and protocols common to academic research and should not be considered as such.

### Data-Gathering Strategies

The Inquiry's information-gathering has included the following activities, some of which have been conducted as a group and some of which have been conducted by individual members of the Inquiry Team, with findings shared with the other members.

#### *Reviews of:*

- Student learning and achievement-related data (learner assessment data; attendance data) at the jurisdiction and school levels.

- NSD documentary records including internal reports, Corporate Board, Corporate Board Committee and LSBC minutes.
- Division and school-level improvement plans (Three-Year Education Plans; Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AIS) Project plans and reports).
- Other plans and reports identified as relevant to student learning and achievement results in NSD.
- Samples of recent PATs to ascertain the degree to which they may be culturally biased, as well as descriptors of test development strategies, especially as those strategies are designed to minimize such bias.
- Selected NSD locally developed instructional resources with respect to improving student learning and achievement results.
- Effective/promising practices for improving FNMI student learner outcomes and achievement results, as a reference for assessing NSD plans and practices.
- Overview of FNMI education governance arrangements in neighbouring provinces.
- Financial and budgetary data (audited financial statements; auditor's management letters; internal financial reports and budgets for system and school levels); also review of budgeting and internal resource allocation (site budgeting) system data.
- Costs associated with the Corporate Board and LSBC governance structure and the central office administrative structure.
- Comparison data for other northern-tier Alberta school jurisdictions.
- Documentation and information specific to the Bishop Routhier School construction project at Peavine Métis Settlement.

The documentary sources are listed in Appendix 4: References.

*Interviews/briefings were conducted with:*

- NSD executive and central office professional staff.
- Alberta Education staff with expertise and familiarity regarding NSD and regarding FNMI activities.
- The superintendents of 11 neighbouring school jurisdictions (in some instances, they involved other administrative and/or elected officials in the discussions).
- Thirty-plus persons, including Alberta Education and NSD staff, identified as having perspectives and/or information of interest to the Inquiry Team; particularly with respect to other recently completed reports commissioned by NSD regarding its operations.
- NSD administrative staff, to interpret financial data and board and administration oversight processes for both operating and capital project activities; also with respect to teacher housing operations.



The interview sources are listed in Appendix 5: Interviews and Briefings.

*Additional information-gathering activities have included:*

- Meetings with the Métis Settlements General Council and with Treaty 8 First Nations Education Council.
- A review of selected scholarly dissertations regarding NSD, discussed in Appendix 6: Doctoral Dissertations Related to NSD.
- Scheduled community visits. Please see below and Appendix 7: Schedule of Community Visits and Consultation Input.
- Survey questionnaires, which were developed by the Inquiry Team and refined, implemented and analyzed by a contracted firm (HarGroup Management Consultants, Inc.) to secure individual input from NSD teaching staff and separately from paraprofessional/support staff. These survey results are discussed in Appendix 8: Partial Teacher and Paraprofessional/Support Staff Survey Questionnaires.
- A review of prior NSD-focused reports. Please see Appendix 9: Prior Studies and Reports Related to Northland School Division.
- Three focus groups of FNMI post-secondary students (from NSD communities as much as possible) were convened at Concordia University College, Northern Lakes College Grouard Campus and Northern Lakes College Wabasca/Stoney Point Campus respectively, to gather input regarding their educational experiences. At Mistassiniy School, where a substantial number of junior and senior high school students are served, focus groups with some of these students were conducted. Please see Appendix 10: Summary of Student Focus Groups.

***Community visits:***

Between April 20, 2010 and June 22, 2010 the Inquiry Team visited each of the 23 communities that comprise NSD to seek advice and perspectives about its terms of reference, particularly improving student learning outcomes, the effectiveness of existing governance structures including alternatives to the present structure and the effectiveness of existing school jurisdiction boundaries. Additional information regarding the community information-gathering is provided in Appendix 7: Schedule of Community Visits and Consultation Input.

In addition to the Inquiry Team members, the community visitation team included the Inquiry's Executive Secretary Lorraine Cardinal-Roy and Debbie Mineault and Billy Joe Laboucan as Community Facilitators who assisted with respect to community protocols and the information-gathering process. The Executive Secretary and the Facilitators were all fluent in Cree and familiar with the communities; in several instances, translation support was utilized by the participants.

In each community a series of meetings was held with each of the following groups:

- School teaching staff
- School paraprofessional (support) staff
- The school principal and assistant principals, where present
- Local leadership of the community (chiefs and councils of First Nations; chairpersons and councils of Métis Settlements; Municipal District/County representatives)
- The LSBC
- Members of the community in discussion group settings.

In a few of the communities where local leadership arrangements were informal and there was an overlap of membership with the LSBC these meetings were combined. This extensive community input gathering process totalled over 100 meetings.

The staff and leadership group meetings were convened during the day and the community meeting took the form of a supper gathering at the school followed by group discussions. Meetings were generally held at the school, with the exception of some of the meetings with local leadership, which were held at their offices. The community visit format generally took from about 9 a.m. through 9 p.m. Additional travel time together provided the team members opportunity for reflection, discussion with the facilitators, debriefing and analysis of the input heard. For the community meetings, every effort was made to have the full team in attendance and for the most part this was achieved. The process was kept as flexible as possible to accommodate local community practices or wishes regarding the structure of the meetings. In addition to information provided in response to the Inquiry's *Discussion Guide for Community Visits* (Appendix 7, Part B), several communities prepared formal presentations to the team and in one case the community leadership presented an extensive perspective on behalf of the community. In several communities, the schools took the opportunity to present student performances of music and dance in conjunction with the community gatherings convened by the Inquiry.

While the Inquiry Team has gathered and considered information from many sources, the input received through the meetings and discussions, which comprised the community visits phase of the Inquiry, provided essential contextual understanding. Some ideas that appear sensible from an external perspective become of questionable viability when considered from a community perspective.

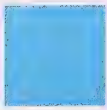
Data from the community meetings and gatherings is extensive. It was summarized and analyzed thematically, and is further presented in Appendix 7.



***Briefs:***

Provision was established and publicised on the Alberta Education website for receipt and review of written input from persons and organizations interested in providing commentary to the inquiry. While response was limited, the input received in this manner was reviewed to provide additional perspectives. The Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA) and Alberta School Councils Association (ASCA) jointly submitted a comprehensive brief. A brief was also received from the Athabasca Tribal Council.

The Inquiry Team is of the view that the data-gathering approaches and activities described above were effective in providing sufficient information and understanding to support the findings and recommendations which follow.



## BACKGROUND CONTEXT

### History of Northland School Division

The history of NSD has been well documented in previous studies. Readers interested in detailed information are referred to the studies summarized in Appendix 9: Prior Studies and Reports Related to Northland School Division.

NSD exists within the context of the establishment of Indian reserve lands and treaties, of Métis Settlements and the settlement of traditional lands by non-natives. These circumstances have shaped and affected relationships within NSD. It is important to note that most people in the NSD communities are affected by the legacy of the residential school era; most grandparents and many parents are products of that troubled experience. The realities of social and economic marginalization also have substantial effects on schooling in many of the communities. The pace of change in the communities has been rapid: most are only one or two generations removed from traditional life on the land.

*The ASBA/ASCA brief (2010) provided the following summary:*

Northland School Division was created as an operating entity by the provincial government in 1960. Unlike other school Divisions in the province that have been operating with locally elected school boards since the creation of Alberta in 1905, Northland was initially governed by a provincially appointed official trustee and superintendent. This arrangement served the Division until 1965 when the Alberta Legislature proclaimed the first *Northland School Division Act*. This Act called for the provincial appointment of five trustees who would replace the Official Trustee. These five trustees were appointed for a three-year term and included an appointed chair from the University of Alberta's Faculty of Education, one representative from the Department of Education, one representative from Municipal Affairs, one representative from Public Welfare and one resident from the Northland area. The goal of the cross-ministry representation was to provide for the co-ordination of various government services to the students of Northland. The Division operated from Edmonton with a provincially appointed superintendent.

The *Northland School Division Act* was amended in 1968. This amendment called for the appointment of seven trustees, five of whom were to be residents of Northland.

The Alberta *School Act* of 1970 replaced provincially appointed superintendents with local board-appointed superintendents. Northland School Division, pursuant to the provisions of the new Act, appointed its first locally appointed superintendent.



The *Northland School Division Act* was again amended in 1976 to allow for the creation of subdivisions within the school Division. Trustees continued to be appointed.

The current *Northland School Division Act* was passed by the Alberta Legislature in 1983. This Act created the governance and operating structure in place in Northland today.

Also, it must be noted that NSD has operated in the broader, evolving context of First Nations and Métis relations with the provincial and federal levels of government. This has resulted in higher expectations of self-determination and self-government over broad areas including education.

What is clear is that NSD has always served primarily an FNMI population and previous boundary reviews and changes have at times resulted in schools that had primarily non-Aboriginal student populations being moved under the administration of other neighbouring systems. In the intervening time since the last comprehensive review of the system was completed in 1996, changes have occurred in the broader context, especially as regards self-determination for education for First Nations. This has resulted in some schools formerly operated by NSD now being operated by bands such as Loon Lake, Cadotte Lake and Garden River. At the time of the inquiry, the land on which the schools at Chipewyan Lake, Peerless Lake and Trout Lake operated was being transferred to First Nation jurisdiction as a result of treaty negotiations. The arrangement regarding the operation of these schools will be subject to continued negotiation.

Extensive economic development has occurred and continues to occur in some of the areas within NSD, such as the Fort McMurray area and other oil and gas developments such as Conklin and Wabasca. During the history of NSD, road infrastructure has improved substantially, so that while many of the schools remain remote and travel distances are significant, they are not as isolated as was the case in 1960. In addition to some schools becoming band-operated over the past 30-plus years, several schools that served largely non-Aboriginal populations have been realigned with neighbouring public school jurisdictions, while some others have left neighbouring local jurisdictions to become part of NSD.

## Current Structure of Northland School Division

The governance structure of NSD is unique among Alberta school authorities, reflecting the cultural diversity and geographic sparseness of its communities.

Key features of this unique governance structure include the following: deeming adult persons living on an Indian Reserve to be electors; providing for the election of a LSBC of three to five members for each of Northland's 23 schools; establishing a Corporate Board of 23 members comprised of the persons elected as chairs of the

LSBCs; and appointing the provincial Auditor General as the auditor of the board. Since 1983 this structure has provided strong Aboriginal representation at both the LSBC and Corporate Board levels.

In conjunction with this governance arrangement, NSD has evolved a highly decentralized, school-based administrative structure, sensitive to LSBC control. By policy, a considerable amount of the Board of Trustees' authority was delegated to the LSBCs. Please see Appendix 11: Northland School Division Policy 7: Local School Board Committees for the complete policy. Over its great geographic distances, the organization's structure appears to lack focus and central policy direction.

The current structure of NSD is very complex in comparison to typical Alberta school authorities. It serves about 2,900 students at 23 schools, all but three of which are small or very small. Distance from administration offices and other major centres is a major factor. For example, the Elizabeth and J.F. Dion schools are more than 700 kilometres from central office in Peace River. Athabasca Delta Community School in Fort Chipewyan is accessible only by air for much of the year. Several schools serve a student population comprised of First Nations students from more than one band as well as Métis and/or non-status Indians residing off-reserve, but in the same area.

## **Recent Results Summary from Annual Reports**

Student achievement results have been consistently lower than the rest of the province, particularly at the Grade 6 and Grade 9 levels. Similarly, high school completion rates are low and the performance of students who do reach the Grade 12 level is weak. Very few of these students complete four or more diploma examination subjects required to meet the entry requirements of most post-secondary institutions. The past five years have shown no improvement in student achievement results beyond some marginal gains at Grade 3. The shortcomings evident in these results have been a continuing cause of concern for the Minister and staff of Alberta Education. A graphical summary of this situation is provided in Appendix 3: Accountability Pillar Overall Summary.

While the former Board of Trustees and the staff of NSD have been concerned about the results, they also exhibited significant scepticism regarding the validity of the measures for northern Aboriginal students, especially PATs.

The financial condition of the jurisdiction has deteriorated, with the operating unrestricted net assets (accumulated surplus) position being substantially expended. The current level of operating expenditures, especially the very favourable staffing ratios at the school level, are exceeding the revenue available from the Alberta funding framework and tuition agreements for First Nations students.

NSD appears stuck with respect to improving student learning outcomes while its financial capacity deteriorates.



## Summary of Previous Related Studies

Inquiry Team members reviewed and summarized six prior studies and the reports and recommendations emanating from these studies. Covering a time span from approximately 1965 to 1996, these prior studies provide observations and recommendations for positive change over 30 years of the history of NSD. They are discussed in more detail in Appendix 9.

The following recommendations, found in several of the reports summarized in Appendix 9, are examples of recurrent concerns. The Inquiry Team notes that these recommendations have never been adequately addressed.

- The need for the continued existence of a unique school system and *for it to have a philosophy, mission and vision that recognizes its uniqueness, especially as regards the cultural background of the student population* (emphasis added).
- The need to adapt the curriculum to the cultural background of the student population.
- The need for more extensive teacher orientation with more focus on developing understanding of the cultural backgrounds of the students, with at least some of the orientation occurring at the community level.
- The need for improved internal communications.
- The need for parenting programs and for a more intensive pre-school learning experience for most students.
- The need to build closer relationships among the schools, the parents and the communities and for schools to be more of a “community centre.”
- The need for improved teacher housing that allows for reasonable rental rates in the context of remote or isolated northern communities.
- The need for the school system to have higher levels of support from other social agencies to assist in addressing challenges such as low student attendance rates.
- The need for a governance structure that supports the principle of local control based on a democratic and representative electoral process while recognizing the need for an ongoing educative support system that enables governors to implement visionary, policy-driven practices and avoid micro-management.
- The need to capitalize on the potential for co-operation with post-secondary institutions that have a presence in the communities to deliver more effective and efficient senior high school programs.

The Inquiry Team noted a striking similarity of findings and recommendations from these reports with those of the present Inquiry. It appears that NSD has been very resistive to change. It is obvious that recommended changes have not been successfully implemented over a lengthy time span. The history of reports and the apparent lack of change emanating from them underscore the urgent need for the recommendations to be addressed.



## FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In general, this section follows the Terms of Reference, with some over-arching considerations dealt with at the beginning. The Inquiry Team feels these primary considerations must be recognized as fundamental to this report's findings and recommendations. This first section then provides brief summaries of richer data collection; those who wish to pursue the richer data will find more detail in the appendices.

### Primary Considerations

Over 95 per cent of the NSD student population are First Nations or Métis; this is a defining characteristic along with its geographic dispersion of predominantly remote, small communities. While the communities have many similarities, to the Inquiry Team they appeared to be far from identical — internal variability is a significant characteristic of NSD.

There is a clear desire expressed in the community input, supported by other advice heard by the team, to keep NSD as an Aboriginal school authority. This desire reflects concerns about marginalization if schools are transferred into mainstream jurisdictions: both geographic and cultural isolation are feared. A key message heard was “Make NSD work, don’t hide the problems of Aboriginal education in other jurisdictions.” reflecting a desire for more effective governance and leadership. While this was not a universal view with some commentary supporting dissolving all or significant parts of NSD into neighbouring jurisdictions, the Inquiry Team’s conclusion is that at this time the dispersion strategy would not contribute to significant improvement in student learning outcomes and could in some cases create setbacks.

At the outset of its work, the Inquiry Team was inclined — based on a cursory look at a map of the area served and on intuitive logic — to simply recommend the dissolution of NSD as a system. In this regard, achievement data from FNMI students in surrounding school systems was examined and while it is below that of the overall school population, it is generally at least somewhat better than achievement data for NSD. However, when the Team visited the communities and surveyed the teachers and paraprofessional/support staff, the Team heard that there was very little support for boundary changes. While some saw possible improvements with boundary changes, most were also concerned that relationships with parents and communities, albeit already not the best, would worsen and that support for FNMI cultural values would also worsen. Additionally, many of the people the Team members interviewed who were knowledgeable about the areas served also told us not to dissolve the system.

Comparing the FNMI achievement data to that in neighbouring systems might suggest that achievement could be improved by shifting some or all NSD schools to the administration of a neighbouring system. However, the Team was mindful



that the FNMI populations served by other school systems do not necessarily share similar needs to those served by NSD; many already have made the move to live in larger mainstream communities to live in closer proximity to such communities — neighbouring FNMI populations should not be assumed to be identical to NSD's population.

**Recommendation #1: That the provincial government maintain the current boundary structure of NSD, except for the circumstances set out later in Recommendations #44 and #45; and that NSD be clearly identified and recognized as a special purpose school authority for Aboriginal education that is focused around capitalizing on its unique opportunity to provide excellence in First Nations and Métis education.**

Talk without action has been a major impediment to the improvement of learning outcomes. The extent of unfulfilled recommendations made in previous reports dating back to the 1970s is disconcerting. “We’ve been studied before and nothing happened.” was a commonly heard comment. There is no benefit in re-constituting NSD just to continue doing as it has done in the past. There needs to be a strong impetus for a revised organization to take substantial actions for the improvement of outcomes; unless positive action is taken, better results will not be achieved. NSD must exemplify key values of responsiveness and accountability.

**Recommendation #2: That Alberta Education implement a mandated progress review process to occur at three-year intervals; further, that if after nine years, there is no or only limited progress in implementing the recommendations of this report and in improving measures in the Annual Educational Result Reports then the need for further interventions, including possible radical boundary change, should be reconsidered.**

Another significant concern for the Inquiry Team, one that impacts all other aspects of NSD's operation, is that the level of trust within the organization is low and that current internal communication processes are ineffective in building trust. For many parents or grandparents this arises from their own negative experiences with NSD schools and the former residential schools system. For staff, the trust issues appear to be mainly associated with personnel decision-making having been extensively delegated to the LSBCs. Improvement will require an action-oriented leadership structure that is centered on strategic, policy-driven governance and focused effort on building trust at all levels over a sustained period of time. Given that improved student attendance must be a central priority for the next nine to 12 years, part of this strategic focus must also be around strengthening parents' engagement with their schools. A structure designed simply around efficiency and accountability principles will not suffice, but will have to include community-level strategies as well.

Parental engagement in support of schooling and student learning is weak. While some parents clearly support and encourage their children's learning, it appears that many do not. The need for parenting programs was frequently expressed.

Poor attendance and repeated tardiness are the other primary contributors to limited student success.

**Recommendation #3:** That NSD implement an improvement strategy requiring an action-oriented leadership structure that is centered on strategic governance and focused on the following three central priorities over the next nine to twelve years:

- English language and numeracy development
- Improved student attendance
- Strengthening parents' engagement with their schools through improving communication and levels of trust. In this regard, NSD take the lead in implementing the FNMI Services Branch parent-engagement initiative.

**Recommendation #4:** That as part of the process to improve parent and community engagement with the school, NSD:

- Encourage and facilitate appropriate teacher involvement with their community, and where possible, develop extracurricular activities with students
- Establish the practice of schools and their staffs regularly hosting community supper gatherings at the school as a means of developing awareness and engagement.

## Student Learning Outcomes and Achievement Results

One of the major reasons for this Inquiry having been established was that NSD's student learning outcomes in literacy and numeracy are weak, not only in comparison to general provincial and northern-tier jurisdictions in general, but also with respect to other FNMI students in other neighbouring school jurisdictions in northern Alberta. NSD's Accountability Pillar results (with the exception of Grade 3) have not indicated any trend of improvement over the past five years. This situation is summarized graphically in Appendix 3: Accountability Pillar Overall Summary. For example, the Annual Education Results Report for October 2009, which reflects results for the 2008-09 school year, indicates that only 40.4 per cent of NSD students achieved an acceptable standard on aggregated Grade 3, 6 and 9 PATs compared to 76.8 per cent for the province as a whole. Taking Grade 6 math as a further example, in 2004, there were 50.4 per cent of NSD students who achieved an acceptable standard; in 2007 there were 38.0 per cent, while in 2009 there were only 34.6 per cent who achieved an acceptable standard. Similarly, only 40.5 per cent of students writing Diploma Exams in 2009 achieved an acceptable standard while

84.4 per cent of all provincial students received an acceptable standard. For the same year, three-year high school completion rates for NSD were only 19.4 per cent (in 2004, they were 24.3 per cent), while for the province as a whole they were 70.7 per cent.

This low performance, as indicated by available data, appears to be associated with poor attendance, lack of initial learning readiness, English language challenges, high teacher turnover and lack of ongoing parental support and engagement. Low attendance rates appear to be of particular significance. In 2000-01, the NSD average was 81.7 per cent; this climbed to a Division high of 84.7 per cent in 2003-04, but dropped again to 81.9 per cent in 2007-08. Considering that average attendance in most school systems is approximately 95 per cent, it is not hard to see the effect low attendance rates can have on student learning. By the end of Grade 6, the average student in NSD has missed approximately 240 days of school, or over one year of school. By Grade 9, some have actually missed two years of school due to poor attendance.

It is important to acknowledge that there have been some good efforts made, especially the *Kikway Kikiskiyitin* project that appeared to be highly regarded by most teachers and appeared to the Inquiry Team to be an appropriate initiative for improvement. This project not only produced culturally appropriate performance assessment materials, but also followed a collaborative model highly valued by participants. However, these Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AIS) and other instructional leadership projects lacked consistency and focus over time. The jurisdictional and school plans for improvement also lacked focus, consistency and persistence. To some extent, this lack of consistency may have been due to Alberta Education's requirement that improvement projects funded through AIS change every three years, and this appears to have been the case with *Kikway Kikiskiyitin*, in spite of its apparent effectiveness. Given high rates of teacher turnover and other circumstances in NSD, a three-year change cycle may have been counterproductive.

Recommendation #3 in the Primary Considerations section above should go a long way toward addressing these concerns.

PATs appear not well-understood in NSD communities and they are perceived as being culturally biased against FNMI students, notwithstanding the standards and processes used by Alberta Education to mitigate this concern, which appeared satisfactory to the team. Some teachers and parents provided anecdotal examples of test items that they considered to be evidence of such bias. A commonly referenced indicator of low achievement was the grade level gap (typically one or two grades) experienced when students from NSD schools transfer to mainstream schools or post-secondary programs. This perception was supported by the grade level of achievement data examined by the team. There was no argument that NSD students lag behind students elsewhere, even if there are differences of opinion about appropriate measurement. In this regard the current, inordinately heavy emphasis on test preparation for PATs is a questionable improvement strategy.



**Recommendation #5:** That NSD more effectively utilize locally developed measures within the Accountability Pillar to better tailor the accountability process to the unique characteristics of the jurisdiction (for example, regarding grade level of achievement).

**Recommendation #6:** That NSD engage teachers and parents in a process of ongoing review of Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs) as they are released in an effort to:

- Build greater awareness and understanding of the tests
- Provide feedback to Alberta Education where there is agreement that particular test items may in fact be biased either culturally or because the items assume background experiences that students living in remote communities may not have.

There is a widely held perception that NSD schools are not teaching the same curriculum as the rest of the province. This is likely a consequence of social placement/promotion that appears to be widespread in NSD and which results in teachers adjusting content to the learning level of students regardless of their grade cohort placement. Many teachers indicated that there are often strong pressures from parents to promote students when it may be in the best interest of students to continue in a grade placement more commensurate with their achievement levels.

**Recommendation #7:** That NSD review and update its grade promotion policy and take steps to ensure that the revised policy is well communicated to parents. NSD should make every effort to ensure that parents understand the distinction between grade placement and academic grade level of achievement.

Limitations in students' academic vocabulary appear to be a primary contributor to lack of student success. This is not just an English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) issue; students start out behind typical mainstream school students, both with respect to limited literacy and familiarity with other pre-school concepts (e.g., colours and numbers). Also, school libraries are in exceptionally poor condition with limited and deteriorated collections, which restricts opportunities for improving reading. The Team recognizes that Information and Communication Technology can address some of the reference/research functions, but is of the opinion that library capacity is still necessary to promote the intrinsic value of reading.

While language capacity and attendance are recognized as critical areas for improvement, proactive strategies to address them are not widely evident. Some schools are pursuing local level initiatives, but a strategically planned, system-wide approach to improving student achievement was not evident.

Within NSD, approximately 86 Early Childhood Services (ECS) students and 1,093 Grades 1 to 12 students have been identified as ESL for purposes of claiming the provincial ESL grant. The Division uses the Jerry Johns Basic Reading Inventory in order to obtain a baseline in reading comprehension and vocabulary. Those students not reading at grade level are coded as ESL students. There is no formal program that is consistent throughout the Division. Strategies for moving students toward mastery of ESL proficiency benchmarks appear to be individual to each school. System administrators report that in regards to ECS, the majority of students are introduced to Animated Literacy Programming. Phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, comprehension and fluency are key elements of the program. For the primary grades, literacy focus is on strategies within blended and guided reading pedagogy. For junior and senior high, teacher focus is on increasing fluency with the academic language favoured by school and text discourse.

**Recommendation #8:** That NSD place sustained emphasis on strengthening languages (English and Aboriginal) by multiple strategies that are tailored to the contextual needs of each community. In this regard specifically that NSD leadership research a successful approach for the acquisition of Aboriginal languages, English language and numeracy. Further, that NSD leadership establish baseline data on these areas and train all staff in effective teaching of selected programs or approaches. That NSD also maintain longitudinal data to track student progress, adjust strategies as needed and carry out ongoing assessment.

**Recommendation #9:** That library enhancement for the purpose of supporting reading be an integral part of the effort to strengthen languages.

**Recommendation #10:** That it be mandatory for NSD schools to offer full-day Kindergarten programs.

**Recommendation #11:** That NSD promote and maintain close coordination with Head Start programs as a means of helping alleviate the readiness for school deficiencies experienced by many students, and further, that in communities where no other agency offers a Head Start program, NSD should consider offering such a program.

Views over the role of Aboriginal language and culture in the schools are divided in at least some communities; among communities, there are significantly differing perspectives on spirituality and religion that come into play. In many cases, the result appears to be a least common denominator effort, providing significantly less Aboriginal language emphasis than might be expected in a predominantly FNMI system. This constrains a consistent and integrated approach to language development.

Infusion of Aboriginal content in the curriculum also appears to be inadequate, which is surprising in a predominantly FNMI school system. NSD has made limited use of the support available from Alberta Education FNMI Services Branch in this regard. Sustaining and enhancing capability in the first language is known to help performance in a second language; emphasis on Cree/Dene will not interfere with ability in English learning, it will enhance it. This perspective could be communicated to parents to increase their understanding of the educational benefits of learning a First Nations language.

There is a lack of professional leadership capacity for Aboriginal language program delivery. The team heard several references to “Kids spend all their time colouring” in Cree language classes — we understand that several of the Cree language instructors are not certificated — which means there is a greater need for pedagogical support for them.

**Recommendation #12:** That NSD strengthen the Aboriginal cultural content within the curriculum; and further that more emphasis, including staff development and support, be placed on Aboriginal content infusion as provided for in the Alberta curriculum.

**Recommendation #13:** That NSD strengthen professional leadership for Aboriginal language instructors and provide training for Aboriginal language instructors to increase the capacity to deliver quality Aboriginal language programs.

**Recommendation #14:** That there be recognition of the reality that not all parents support Aboriginal language and cultural instruction within the school environment by providing an opt-out arrangement similar to the manner in which public schools generally deal with religious instruction.

Small high school enrolments present serious program delivery challenges in most communities. Many students who go on to high school must attend school outside of NSD. The support arrangements for these students are limited. There appears to be a weak and variable relationship between communities served by NSD schools at the elementary and junior high school levels and the neighbouring jurisdictions that provide the high school programs. In part, this arises from ambiguity about the role of the LSBCs and that of the corporate level of NSD in maintaining relationships with neighbouring jurisdictions.

Input received indicates that two of the favoured approaches to improvements in this area are offering more courses at the local high school level and providing more counselling. Increasing distance learning was not regarded as a favoured strategy, but it may be the only realistic one in some circumstances. Co-ordination of school calendars and timetables is an issue that needs to be addressed so that distance delivery technology can be more effective. Decisions regarding technology-based distance learning have been extensively decentralized under the local governance structure.



The Inquiry Team also frequently heard that transitioning to other schools outside NSD was really difficult for students, whether bused or boarded. “Racism” was often identified as a factor in this regard.

It should also be noted that Northern Lakes College has a presence in many communities and in spite of recommendations in several earlier studies, there was little evidence of co-operation with that entity to deliver high school courses, even when it was offering adult upgrading in the same communities.

**Recommendation #15:** That NSD establish a system-level to system-level administrative liaison process with neighbouring school jurisdictions providing instruction to students from NSD communities to address student and program articulation issues and other considerations.

**Recommendation #16:** That NSD endeavour to improve communications with schools and jurisdictions offering junior-senior high school services to NSD students. Further, that NSD assign staff to monitor the performance of, and act as an advocate for, all students pursuing junior-senior high school programs in schools outside of NSD.

**Recommendation #17:** That NSD give planning consideration to establishing a combined regional and virtual high school to serve students in the smaller communities, as an alternative to existing boarding arrangements.

**Recommendation #18:** That NSD initiate and sustain discussions with Northern Lakes College and any other post-secondary institution that has a presence in communities served by NSD to capitalize on potential joint efforts in high school programming.

## Central Administration and Leadership

Replacement of a previous Superintendent of Schools upon retirement in 2008 was problematic and divisive for the Board of Trustees. This weakened a key leadership role that was already compromised by the extent to which decision-making authority had been delegated to the LSBCs. In addition, the role and effectiveness of the school principals have been very dependent on the dynamics of their relationships with the LSBCs given the extent of power delegated to them by the former Policy 7. (See Appendix 11: Northland School Division Policy 7-Local School Board Committees.)

It was pointed out during a number of our discussions that having a board that has been primarily Aboriginal does not appear to have situated power and authority with Aboriginal people given that most, if not all, senior administrators have not been Aboriginal.

**Recommendation #19:** That as NSD is re-defined as a special purpose system for Aboriginal education, there be a requirement, over time, for persons in leadership roles to have FNMI heritage and Aboriginal language fluency along with demonstrated skill in dealing effectively with Aboriginal cultures.

The “Seven Point Plan” initiative to address student achievement outcomes was complex, not well-understood and exceeded the implementation capacity of the organization.

The capacity for system leadership to maintain personal contact with the schools is very limited. Over time, there has been what is regarded as a hollowing-out of management and central staff positions in the context of balancing the high governance operations costs of a large board with staff costs within the administration block cap of the funding framework. This has had a detrimental impact on effective communication. While there remains a need for effectively sharing operational information (organizational events, happenings and so on), the core communication emphasis needs to be on marketing the system’s beliefs to its stakeholders. It is time to stop blaming various deficiencies and start promoting proactive parenting; to advocate the intrinsic value of learning, regardless of short-term economic prospects; to promote the joy of reading for its own sake; and to take pride in First Nations and Métis cultures. Again, to be effective, this initiative must be sustained over time.

Processes for internal quality assurance are weak and contribute to the low level of trust. For example, the teacher supervision and evaluation framework and procedures for dealing with parent concerns, do not appear to be clearly understood or consistently applied. The practice of delegating personnel decisions regarding hiring and term-contract renewal to the LSBCs is a major contributing factor to this problem. Regardless of policy provisions for multi-level consideration, these issues often appear to start and finish at the principal’s desk or the LSBC table. People in the community meetings expressed the view that there was inadequate teacher supervision. At the same time, teachers and paraprofessional staff indicated a concern about threats to job security that they perceived not to be based on appropriate evaluative processes, but on whim and hearsay. While nurturing student esteem is very important in the NSD context, it is also important that schools be a place of intellectual rigour where teachers can appropriately challenge student thinking without fear of inappropriate repercussions.

These concerns are indicative of limited implementation of principles of effective governance, particularly with respect to matters such as confidentiality and conflict of interest. While trustees participated in conferences and events that provided training in this regard, effective and consistent implementation of good practice was not evident. The Inquiry frequently heard about parents going directly to the LSBC rather

than communicating first and foremost with teachers and principals. While likely well-intended, this process led to a breakdown in good governance and communication.

The devolution of hiring and term-contract renewal decision-making to the LSBCs undermined effective personnel management. The cumbersome, time-consuming hiring process with teachers having to be interviewed at the community level was often identified as an impediment to effective staffing. It was suggested that NSD needs to have a more streamlined recruitment process. The suggestion was for the communities to provide input to the type of people they wanted to see hired and for the administrators to do the hiring in a timely manner. This would enable prospective teachers to more fairly compete in a job market where availability of teachers willing to go to remote communities is limited.

A high turnover rate of principals at some schools is a significant impediment to effective school operation and improvement.

Difficulty in securing certificated substitute teachers was frequently identified as a concern, as was the need for improved training of paraprofessional staff.

In most cases, the orientation of new teachers to their communities is very limited, as is their engagement with the communities. A frequently expressed desire by communities was to see teachers attend community functions and engage in extracurricular activities with students, while at the same time a frequently expressed concern by teachers was the risk of inadvertently giving offence or getting caught up in local politics and running afoul of the LSBC. There is a need to create a sense of teamwork among the parents, students and teachers.

**Recommendation #20:** That NSD re-establish an effective orientation program for new hires, with a substantial emphasis on community and cultural components, and further, that the placement of new employees into communities be arranged with sufficient time for them to experience a community-level orientation and settling-in prior to the start of teaching duties.

Improved housing was an issue raised by teachers as one of their top five considerations for improving retention — and was mentioned in virtually all of our meetings by both teachers and community members. The Inquiry Team was able to tour some teacherages and saw firsthand what dismal living environments they can be.

Teacher housing issues are a significant impediment to teacher retention in some but not all communities. This is significant because improved teacher retention can benefit student outcomes in at least two areas: teacher effectiveness in individualizing multi-level instruction, which often improves with situational experience; and strengthening student and parent trust in the school. It is hard to



come to trust someone you never get to know. The grouping of teacherages into compounds reflects a paradoxical situation: the benefit of teachers' engagement with the community is placed in contention with teachers' sense of insecurity in the Aboriginal community setting.

Isolation is also a significant teacher retention factor. Teachers indicated that providing more opportunities to network and interact with other teachers was also one of the top five ways to improve teacher retention. The *Kikway Kikiskiyitin* project produced some very good instructional resource products, but one of its main values, mentioned by many staff, was the process which enabled or provided a vehicle for teacher interaction and networking. The videoconferencing suites, made fully operative, appear to have great potential in this regard.

Another factor that was mentioned by both teaching and paraprofessional staff was the perceived unfairness of the Fort McMurray Allowance and the fact that it is available only to Anzac and Fort McKay, whereas actual living costs are much higher in places like Fort Chipewyan.

Capacity has been reduced over time for instructional, administrative and support services. This is particularly problematic given that the geographic distribution and remoteness of the schools requires considerable travel time for central staff to visit the sites. Reduction of administrative and pedagogical support has left schools, principals and teachers to find their own way as best they can. This has created a particularly difficult situation for new principals and inexperienced teachers new to the circumstances of NSD schools. The reduction of capacity extends to and has negatively impacted Aboriginal language programs.

In the community meetings and in the Team's focus groups with students, the Team was informed that learning could be improved by more differentiation of instruction and by more hands-on, experiential learning. The Team was also told that there were too many worksheets, which is, of course, evidence of an emphasis that is opposite to experiential learning.

**Recommendation #21:** That NSD implement and maintain staff development activities that enhance teachers' skills at individualizing, differentiating instruction, employing more experiential-based learning activities and devising learning activities that include formative assessment skills, in recognition of the diverse learning levels and needs of NSD students.

Reduction of business service management capacity has resulted in re-combinations of role functions that may compromise effectiveness. For example, the lack of capacity for timely internal financial management reporting and analysis has added to the challenges of planning and budgeting.

Similarly, there is a lack of professional management capacity for the human resources administrative function. The NSD-commissioned *Position Descriptions for Central Office Staff Roles Report* (2009) identified this need.

Teachers and school administrators frequently told the Team that many operational areas were regarded at the school level as being excessively controlled and constrained centrally (for example, field trips and the information and communication technology network). At least in part this may be a coping mechanism arising from limited support capacity.

**Recommendation #22:** That NSD ensure strengthened responsibility and accountability relationships between students, teachers, principals and the superintendency. In particular, that the human resources management function (recruitment and termination of personnel) become clearly a management activity with appropriate community input only; it must cease to be regarded as a governance function subject to political processes.

**Recommendation #23:** That NSD re-establish central, regionally based, administrative and pedagogical roles by re-directing some resources away from classroom-based positions. These re-established roles should provide direction, assistance and support to principals and teachers for NSD-wide approaches, implementation and assessment of core literacy and numeracy programs.

School staff informed the Inquiry Team that, in general, parents and other community members exhibited low levels of engagement with the schools. On the other hand, the Inquiry Team heard from parents and community members that the schools were not welcoming places. Many were quite critical of what they perceived to be a lack of involvement by teachers in extracurricular activities for students and in community-based activities.

The Inquiry Team noted that in many communities adult education was offered by post-secondary institutions in mobile or other facilities that were not part of the school. The same was often true of Head Start programs for pre-school children. It appeared that there was often a limited awareness by school staff of what was happening in these other programs and that there was limited communication with other program deliverers. In some communities, it appeared that there were very limited services in the health and social services areas. Where such services were available, school staff, parents and community members indicated that they felt these services provided little support to schools in addressing such issues as low attendance.

In considering this input, the Inquiry Team was led to reflect on their prior experiences with the Community School models prevalent in Alberta and other areas of Canada and the United States in the 1970s. A few of the key characteristics of these models were as follows.

- The involvement of citizens in school affairs, including the use of community members as instructional resources and a shared community-school responsibility for the general behaviour of youth.
- The utilization of school and community facilities in the instructional process of the K-12 program and in providing community school programs.
- The use of schools after normal school hours as community facilities for recreational and avocational programs.
- Providing basic education and high school completion programs for adults or at the very least, the use of the school facility for that purpose.
- The employment of a community-school co-ordinator and provision of supplementary funding for extra janitorial services, etc., required to implement the previous four characteristics.

The Inquiry Team notes that some aspects of the currently extant Integrated Services Delivery Model (ISDM) were in evidence in some communities, for example, the “When We Are Healthy” project evident in Grouard, Gift Lake and Peavine schools. The Team felt this model has potential to help address many of the challenges experienced by children and youth in communities served by all NSD schools. This effective model may be described as “a primary, vertically integrated health and social services organization based on Regional Health and Social Services Authority/ Departmental structure, that has formal linkages with other health and social service providers in the [province or territory] and elsewhere and that has established delivery system processes, procedures and tools that are rooted in a collaborative approach to client care in all core service areas, particularly at the primary community care level, but radiating outward to secondary and tertiary levels of care.” (Northwest Territories Health and Social Services. 2004)

**Recommendation #24:** That NSD establish and sustain over time a school-community development function within the organization. This function should include a staff position whose job is to regularly and systematically facilitate school-based meetings with parents and community members to develop the school’s strategic role within the future of the community. This staff position must take the lead in implementing the parent engagement process, including reflecting the concepts behind the former Community Schools program and the Integrated Services delivery model. Further, that this function also include designated resources to enable school staff to regularly host community gatherings (such as community suppers) at the school.



Recommendation #3 of this report emphasized that NSD needs a strategic governance effort focused on a limited number of key priorities. It was also noted that levels of trust within NSD are low and that current internal communications processes are ineffective in building trust. Discussions at the school level revealed that staff, parents and community members often have very limited knowledge of the operations and/or priorities of the Corporate School Board.

**Recommendation #25: That NSD establish and sustain over time an internal communications function. This function should include a staff position whose job is to ensure that key messages about the system's priorities are directed to internal audiences through all appropriate channels. These key messages include the importance of: schooling, regular attendance, consistent parental support and the inclusion of Aboriginal culture.**

At the time of the Inquiry, NSD employed approximately 200 paraprofessional/support staff. They were employed as secretaries, teacher assistants, student assistants (most of whom provided learning support to special needs students), school-community liaison workers and language instructors for Cree and Dene languages.

The Inquiry Team noted that NSD employs a higher ratio of paraprofessional/support staff to students than is characteristic of most school jurisdictions. Given the high incidence of special needs students and the greater need for positions such as school-community liaison workers and language instructors, this situation is quite appropriate. Most of these staff members are local people of Aboriginal background and obviously can be very helpful in bridging cultural gaps between schools and communities. Many parents, community members and LSBC members also informed the Team that there was a need for even more paraprofessional/support staff, especially in the area of student assistants for special needs students. However, many of the people also indicated that there was a need for these staff members to have higher levels of training and to be selected on the basis of their competence rather than on other factors such as family relationships.

Survey questionnaires were sent to all paraprofessional/support staff and approximately 58 questionnaires were returned, the majority of these from student assistants (43 per cent) and teacher assistants (29 per cent). The respondents were primarily female (94 per cent) and of Aboriginal background (85 per cent).

The paraprofessional/support staff who responded indicated they felt that providing more opportunities for professional development would be one of the most important actions that NSD could take to improve student learning. Many also indicated that professional development should be directly related to their job assignments. They further indicated that such action would help to improve paraprofessional/support staff retention.

The Inquiry Team met with groups of paraprofessional/support staff at each of the 23 schools and heard the same desire for more professional development as expressed in the surveys.

NSD central office staff provided available training records for 134 of the approximately 200 of paraprofessional/support staff. An analysis of these records indicates the following training levels:

- 37 staff have less than Grade 12
- 24 staff have completed Grade 12, but appear to have no further training
- 44 staff have some college courses, but appear not to have completed a diploma/certificate
- 14 staff have completed some type of college level diploma/certificate
- 11 staff have completed some university courses
- 4 staff have completed a university degree.

This analysis was somewhat difficult to complete as it is at times hard to determine the nature of certificates/diplomas. In some cases, it appears that staff members have been given entry to various college classes/programs without having completed Grade 12, likely because they were adult-status students. It is, of course, also the case that some staff hold diplomas/certificates and/or degrees that are not necessarily related to their assignments. Also, it appears that the 44 staff that have completed some college courses in many instances have an array of courses that do not necessarily have a focus on any particular program; this likely being the result of difficulty in accessing post-secondary courses in the remote communities in which they reside.

However, in general it is the contention of the Inquiry Team that paraprofessional/support staff are crucial to the support of student learning in NSD schools. In that regard, the Team supports the view of these staff members about the important need for more professional development, and an overall higher level of education, for them.

The Team noted the positive consequences evident from the Aboriginal Teacher Education Program, provided by local post-secondary institutions in collaboration with the University of Alberta Faculty of Education. NSD is to be commended for having helped initiate this project and for supporting a significant number of their paraprofessional staff to get certification. However, many more of the paraprofessionals will continue as paraprofessionals — their work is vital to the improvement of student learning — and more needs to be done to enhance their capacity to do that.

**Recommendation #26:** That NSD continue to maintain and enhance records of the levels of training of paraprofessional/support staff.

**Recommendation #27:** That where paraprofessional/support staff members have not completed a level of training commensurate with their assignments, each staff member develop a training plan that leads to a recognized credential relating to their assignments and that NSD encourage and assist staff with in-service programs tied to course requirements.

**Recommendation #28:** That when new paraprofessional/support staff are hired, they be required to commit to an upgrading program/plan that leads to a recognized credential related directly to their assignment.

## Financial and Capital Management

A series of operating deficits, apparently initially intended to draw down a long-term accumulated operating surplus, have accelerated to the point that the financial condition has deteriorated rapidly. Consequently, the expenditure patterns of the past several years cannot be sustained. In 2009, there was an accumulated operating surplus of \$4.5 million; the projected 2009–10 operating deficit was \$2.6 million to \$4.0 million; and the projected 2010–11 operating deficit is \$1.5 million. Since First Nations' tuition payments to NSD constitute a significant revenue stream to the jurisdiction and since the payment schedule for these amounts can be quite variable, maintaining a working capital balance in the order of \$4 million is considered desirable to avoid short-term borrowing costs for operational cash flow.

The provisions of the provincial funding framework for education enacted through the *Funding Manual for School Authorities* enables NSD to receive a significantly higher level of resources per provincial pupil than the provincial average support per pupil. This is indicative of the special and compensatory circumstances required by the students in the NSD context. While adequacy of funding is always an issue from some perspectives, the central issue for NSD at this time is making more effective use of the available resources to improve student outcomes.

Effective budgeting and managerial decision-making has been, and is constrained by, very limited internal financial management data reporting and analysis capacity. In addition to limiting management effectiveness, this situation restricts effective governance oversight. The 2009 Organizational Review did not result in this condition being adequately addressed.

**Recommendation #29:** That NSD ensure appropriate personnel and internal arrangements are in place for systematic quarterly financial reporting to the Board of Trustees.

The jurisdiction has established a very low student-teacher ratio (about 12:1 on September 30 enrolment, becoming about 10:1 by the second term of the school year) and with extensive paraprofessional and other school-based support staffing, the aggregate student-to-adults in the building ratio is about 5:1. The effectiveness of this strategy appears doubtful in terms of improving student learning outcomes.



With the exception of a few newly constructed facilities, NSD's school inventory is aged and of poor quality. In particular, the portable classroom components of many schools are seriously deteriorated.

NSD continues to operate water and sewer utilities in several communities where municipal services are not available to its facilities and does so without funding support.

Teacher housing operations present the following significant financial issues:

- Deferred major maintenance in the order of \$790,000
- Lack of provision for replacement of depreciated buildings:
  - 30 units of the 142-unit inventory are fully depreciated
  - It would appear that their condition indicates that there is a dire need for replacement
- Costs are subsidized from the instructional budget because full recovery through rental rates is not considered feasible by several knowledgeable people who provided input
  - The Inquiry Team agrees, due to the impediment non-subsidized housing would create for staff recruitment.

**Recommendation #30:** That Alberta Education and NSD jointly explore supporting NSD teacher housing through an arms-length entity (some type of housing authority) acting on NSD's behalf, and perhaps on behalf of other public sector employers in northern Alberta communities, in order to get away from the staff relations issues associated with the employer being the landlord; further that innovative, ongoing provincial funding be implemented to enable such an arrangement to be viable.

**Recommendation #31:** That Alberta Education provide one-time catch-up funding to NSD for upgrading to current standards school libraries and facilities, particularly with respect to old portable classrooms, and the teacher housing inventory.

Micro-management has abounded, both by the Corporate Board at the system level and by the LSBCs at the community level. Governance appears to have been equated with control of operations rather than strategic leadership, direction-setting and policy-making. Effective delegation of operational decisions, strategic analysis and oversight of management through accountability-based reporting has been virtually nonexistent. In this context, both the Corporate Board and LSBCs have been vulnerable to upward delegation of management decisions from staff. Recommendations follow in the Governance section of the report to address this issue.

Construction of the new Bishop Routhier School on the Peavine Métis Settlement proceeded on the strength of NSD relying on a verbal understanding between the private landholder and the Settlement Council in office at that time. The understanding was that a land exchange of equivalent value would be made in order for the Settlement to secure control of the desired site and then lease it to NSD. While this type of agreement may be consistent with a culture of oral traditions, it was inadequate for a project of this magnitude. Proceeding from a verbal agreement to a written agreement became challenging when composition of the Settlement Council changed through a local election. Building construction was completed before the land agreement was concluded, which precluded timely occupancy of the building by NSD. The absence of a land agreement to define property lines also contributed to a disagreement between NSD and the Settlement over utility services to the site and the associated costs.

During the course of the Inquiry, the land issue was resolved by the parties (NSD, the Settlement Council and the landholder) and operation of the new school commenced.

There apparently are other instances of NSD schools having been built on Métis Settlement lands based on traditional understandings and agreements rather than formal leases; however, to date, these circumstances do not appear to have interfered with any other school operations. It should be noted that provisions of the Métis Settlements legislation intended to secure the land base over time make long-term third-party landholding arrangements difficult to establish. This is a significant complicating factor for NSD at these locations.

**Recommendation #32:** That NSD obtain title to, or an enforceable long-term interest in, land prior to commencing construction of any capital project.

**Recommendation #33:** That NSD ensure it has appropriate leases in place for all its schools situated on Métis Settlement lands.

**Recommendation #34:** That prior to releasing funds for the construction of new school facilities, Alberta Education verify that the recipient school jurisdiction has obtained title to, or an enforceable long-term interest in, the land for the building site.

While a substantial portion of students in NSD schools are residents of First Nations and are attending under tuition agreements, many of these agreements are stale and may not adequately address current needs and situations. The lack of direction flowing from the inadequacy of the current agreements contributes to dysfunction. For the 2009–10 school year, First Nations tuition support under the existing agreements averaged \$15,760/pupil, while funding for provincially supported students averaged \$18,280/pupil including School Food Services funding (\$16,375/pupil excluding food services). At the same time, there are concerns among the First Nations about NSD's responsiveness to education issues. A more contemporary and

comprehensive education agreement such as the template in Appendix 13: Sample Generic Local Education Agreement may address this situation.

**Recommendation #35:** That Alberta Education facilitate negotiation of a new, omnibus Education Agreement between NSD and Treaty 8 First Nations within the context of the *Memorandum of Understanding on First Nations Education in Alberta*, to replace the dated tuition agreements currently in place.

There is a substantial need for adapted curriculum and learning resources for Aboriginal students, not only those in NSD, but others served by band-operated schools with no second level supports and in neighbouring school systems with substantial Aboriginal populations. The new *Memorandum of Understanding* could provide a framework for addressing this need with substantial involvement of NSD.

**Recommendation #36:** That Alberta Education take a leadership role in the establishment of a regional service and support consortium for First Nations and Métis education, involving NSD with neighbouring school jurisdictions and the First Nations education authorities operating in northern Alberta; further that funds from the FNMI grant be considered to enable initiatives in this area.

## Fiduciary Responsibilities

Both Corporate Board and LSBC meeting minutes indicate that the conflict-of-interest provisions of the *School Act* appear to be understood and recognized. However, there are perception issues about inappropriate influence associated with extended families common in the communities, given the extent of hiring authority that has been delegated to LSBCs and their involvement in school operation (for example, in student discipline matters). Concerns were also raised regarding maintaining confidentiality of student and personnel matters within the small community context.

A structural issue arises regarding whose student interests LSBC chairpersons represent when they sit as the Board of Trustees — the interest of NSD students as a whole or the interest of the students in the community they represent. This can be particularly problematic with respect to priority-setting questions such as capital construction priorities.

A more indirect but pervasive issue has been that of power, control and local political interests taking precedence over the educational best interests of the students. This problem has been aggravated by the inadequacy of accountability structures for both LSBC and Corporate Board members.

Recommendations that follow in the Governance section should help to address these issues.



## Governance

In comparison to other Alberta school jurisdictions, which typically have five- to nine-member school boards, NSD has a very large number of elected officials (more than 100) for the size of the jurisdiction (approximately 2,900 students). Operating costs for the governance function (Corporate Board and LSBCs) were approximately \$900,000/year, significantly higher than for other rural school jurisdictions and taking up an accordingly larger part of the Division's administration budget cap. The funding framework makes no specific provision for costs associated with the unique multi-level governance structure of NSD.

Empowerment of decision-making at the community and corporate levels through the *Northland School Division Act* (a key attribute of the current governance system) has not resulted in broad-based community engagement to support student learning. It is the Inquiry Team's perception that the reason the *MacNeil Report* (1981) recommendation regarding the size of the board was not accepted at that time was likely that it was felt then that the 23-member structure would contribute more to broad-based community engagement. However, the Inquiry Team saw little evidence that this has happened.

The roles and responsibilities of the Corporate Board are poorly understood at the community level and accountability to the community is very limited. Concerns were expressed that in some instances, elected officials become very long-term position holders, which is viewed by some as problematic.

The Corporate Board did not function effectively as a Board of Trustees. Its size appeared to make it unwieldy and unfocused and contributed to its ineffectiveness. Its size also contributed to a core group of veteran trustees forming controlling factions. Committees of the Corporate Board also have had very large memberships.

Governance roles and responsibilities appear to have been consistently blurred such that the board chair and LSBC chairs were becoming involved in management, operational and administrative matters that in an ideal governance model should be left to the superintendent and principals. This blurring of governance roles and responsibilities created confused expectations, particularly among the principals, regarding responsibility and accountability.

Both the Corporate Board of Trustees and LSBCs were performing predominantly management rather than governance functions. The Inquiry Team's analysis of board, LSBC and board committees' minutes revealed that board and overall governance was focused primarily on operational details, for example, small value purchases at the school level and similar operational matters that should have been dealt with by staff within budget and policy direction from the board. In spite of periodic board and administrative staff-planning retreats, there was little indication of strategic leadership at the system level and in only a few cases at the community level.

**Recommendation #37:** That Alberta Education entrench NSD's governance policies and protocols in a Ministerial Order, or similar arrangement, to ensure that those in governance roles focus on governance activities and delegate management activities to staff, subject to effective accountability, reporting and oversight processes in a manner that cannot be unilaterally revised by NSD.

The Inquiry Team has concluded that a smaller Board of Trustees whose members represent more diverse interests than those of a single community is more likely to provide the governance leadership needed. As well, individual community perspectives can be provided effectively through a Council of LSBC Chairs meeting on a structured, advisory basis with that board. Appendix 12: Renewed Governance Model illustrates this structure.

**Recommendation #38:** That the provincial government amend the *Northland School Division Act* to establish a nine-member Board of Trustees; seven elected by direct election (ward system), one other a First Nations representative nominated pursuant to an Education Agreement (with Treaty 8) and one other a Métis representative nominated by Métis Settlements General Council, both of the latter appointed to the board by the Minister of Education. For a graphic representation, please see Appendix 12: Renewed Governance Model.

**Recommendation #39:** That a term limit of not more than two consecutive three-year terms be established for members of the Board of Trustees to ensure effective representation from throughout the system over time and to minimize the potential of factional politics and inappropriate concentrations of power.

**Recommendation #40:** That an *ex officio* (non-voting) member of the Board of Trustees be appointed by the Minister of Education as a process observer and coach to facilitate organizational change and ensure that the participants of the new structure remain true to intent. Please see Appendix 12: Renewed Governance Model.

It should be noted that most communities expressed a dislike of any shared representation approach, but if forced, the view that many communities did not seem particularly engaged with corporate level governance may gain acceptance. It is worth reiterating that the *MacNeil Report* (1981) recommended a board structure similar to what is again being recommended in this report, but it was not implemented at that time. The Inquiry Team advises that when an implementation team begins its work, these governance recommendations are one of its priorities.

It was apparent from input that LSBCs are not necessarily representative of their communities, particularly of parent interests. There frequently appeared to be inconsistent and deficient communication between LSBCs and parents. The community politics of extended families at times distort LSBC functions. Also, teachers have no voice and there is little communication between the LSBCs and the teachers. Suggestions were heard that a higher standard of qualification than is required by current legislation (for example, an education standard) should be established for LSBC members.

**Recommendation #41:** That Alberta Education support a governance structure that fosters a sense of ownership at the community and parent levels without impinging unduly on school operations and teachers' professional practice.

**Recommendation #42:** That the provincial government amend the *Northland School Division Act* to expand LSBC membership to include parent and teacher representation and that its role be consistent with that of a School Council as set out in the *School Council Regulation*.

**Recommendation #43:** That a Council of Chairs of the newly constituted Local Boards meet twice yearly with the Board of Trustees in a legislative advisory role.

## Boundary Arrangements

As indicated previously, there is generally strong opposition to realignment of schools with those outside of NSD jurisdiction. Concerns were expressed that if schools were realigned into neighbouring jurisdictions, there would be ensuing school closure because of the new jurisdiction's school closure policies and processes. Uncertainty and lack of awareness about neighbouring schools and jurisdictions was evident. However, the prospective loss of an FNMI focus at the school was a frequent objection. Unfortunately, concerns about racism and prejudice in neighbouring mainstream communities were also raised in opposition to boundary changes.

However, the Athabasca Delta communities viewed NSD somewhat differently and with less support than the other communities. The more diverse demographic composition of Anzac, Red Earth Creek and Keg River made them atypical among the NSD schools. Input at Anzac was interesting in that much of the opposition to realignment with Fort McMurray seemed to centre on negative perceptions about municipal regionalization associated with Wood Buffalo Regional Municipality, rather than with the Fort McMurray school systems. Input at Keg River focused on continued viability of the school. The 2009–10 enrolment of Dr. Mary Jackson School comprises approximately 20 Aboriginal students and four non-Aboriginal students, with many of these students residing as close to Paddle Prairie as to Keg River.



Neighbouring jurisdictions expressed many reservations about having a NSD school or schools transferred into their systems, particularly without appropriate consultative arrangements and without clear understandings about how funding differentials would be addressed. Both NSD communities and the neighbouring jurisdictions are aware that under the provisions of the provincial funding framework for school jurisdictions, NSD schools receive a higher level of school-based resources for such resources as staffing, hot lunch programs and student supplies. Neighbouring jurisdictions indicated that the extensive powers of the LSBCs would not be acceptable within their governance structures. Some also indicated that unless socio-economic conditions, lack of parent engagement and student truancy issues could be addressed, they would not be optimistic about their potential to improve student achievement.

Notwithstanding these views, a NSD that is focused on excellence in First Nations and Métis education may become less relevant to the Anzac, Red Earth Creek and Keg River communities. Realignment with neighbouring jurisdictions based on social, economic and transportation linkages may be effective alternatives in the first two cases; in the latter, the situation is essentially one of declining enrolment giving rise to a school-closure issue which NSD needs to address. Also noted is that while the Pelican Lake School also presents a low-enrolment issue, the situation there is more of a program re-design in conjunction with the overall Wabasca-area program delivery arrangements than a school closure issue.

**Recommendation #44:** That Alberta Education appoint a facilitator to work with the Anzac School community and Fort McMurray Public School District regarding realignment of Anzac School to Fort McMurray Public School District jurisdiction.

**Recommendation #45:** That Alberta Education initiate a process for transferring Red Earth Creek School to Peace River School Division jurisdiction.

**Recommendation #46:** That NSD initiate school closure proceedings at Keg River.

There are eight Métis Settlements in Alberta. NSD administers schools on six of the Settlements and Northern Lights School Division administers schools for two Settlement populations. In general, the populations of the Métis Settlements that were consulted by the Inquiry Team indicated their preference for their schools to be administered by NSD for the reasons indicated in the previous sections of this report. However, there were some dissenting points of view. Also, some questioned why NSD was not administering the schools for all of the Métis Settlements. Given that First Nations populations increasingly have been granted self-determination in educational matters and given the general provisions regarding education in the Métis Settlements legislation, it seems logical to the Inquiry Team that Métis populations living on

Métis Settlements should have a similar option. In this regard, the Inquiry Team's understanding is that plebiscites are a decision-making process commonly used by Métis Settlements.

**Recommendation #47:** That Alberta Education establish a process for Métis Settlements to periodically determine by plebiscite if they wish to remain part of NSD or transfer to a neighbouring school jurisdiction or vice-versa.

## Implementation

All parties involved with improving student outcomes in NSD are challenged to work together in a concerted effort to see that the recommendations of this report (especially those that are repetitive of recommendations in previous reports) are attended to. This situation calls for the creation of a structure that will monitor implementation on a consistent and intentional basis over the next few years.

**Recommendation #48:** That Alberta Education create a multi-stakeholder implementation team including representation from:

- All its branches involved with NSD operations;
- NSD leadership; and
- The external agencies and organizations involved with NSD

to engage in developing and delivering strategies, including those for community engagement with this report's recommendations, which are necessary to bring about positive change in NSD.

## Other Matters

No other matters were directed to the Inquiry Team by the Minister.





## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

It is recognized that NSD is already undertaking a number of improvement initiatives that are consistent with the recommendations of this report, including:

- Strengthening teacher capacity through an expanded orientation program for new hires and the establishment of mentor coaches for new teachers;
- Implementation of a comprehensive literacy strategy;
- Reinstatement of regionally based leadership support for principals and teachers;
- Implementation of a principals' leadership development program;
- Re-focusing a senior administration role on community relationships and engagement; and
- A major expenditure from capital reserves to address urgent teacher housing repair issues.

The Inquiry Team commends NSD for prompt action in this regard.

The Team acknowledges that several of its recommendations imply additional costs in a few key areas. The Team's proposed solution to additional cost pressures implied by its recommendations includes such measures as the following:

- The provincial government coming to the table with some one-time funding to get some areas up to a realistic standard in short order;
- NSD moving toward somewhat higher staff-student ratios and cease responding to unrealistic local political pressures to have every grade have its own teacher even if there are only five students in that grade;
- Reducing the cost of board operations and possibly tough negotiating involving four parties — the federal government, the provincial government, affected First Nations and NSD — to get fiscal contributions for First Nations students up somewhere near what the province is spending per pupil in NSD.

The Team expresses its sincere appreciation for the hospitality of the communities, for the time taken by staff to complete the surveys and for the willingness of people invited to share their experiences and expertise regarding NSD.

The Team wishes to sincerely acknowledge the support and non-interfering approach of staff of Alberta Education over the duration of the Team's proceedings.

The Team trusts that the enactment of the recommendations in this report will go a long way toward providing the students of NSD with the highest quality education possible and enable them to succeed in their own communities and in the broader communities of Alberta and Canada.

Respectfully submitted,

N. Matthew

K. Wagner

D. van Tamelen





